



Dana E. Blackwell
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LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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SANDRA RUDNICK, VICE CHAIR
ADELINA SORKIN, LCSW/ACSW
DR. HARRIETTE WILLIAMS, CHAIR

APPROVED MINUTES

The General Meeting of the Commission for Children and Families was held on Monday, **June 21, 2004**, in room 140 of the Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration, 500 West Temple Street, Los Angeles. **Please note that these minutes are intended as a summary and not as a verbatim transcription of events at this meeting.**

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT (Quorum Established)

Carol O. Biondi
Joyce Fahey
Brenda Galloway
Helen Kleinberg
Daisy Ma
Christina S. Mattingly
Sandra Rudnick
Adelina Sorkin
Dr. Harriette Williams

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT (Excused/Unexcused)

Patricia Curry
Phalen G. Hurewitz
Dr. La-Doris McClaney
Trinity Wallace-Ellis, Youth Representative

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

The agenda for the June 21, 2004, meeting was unanimously approved.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the May 17, 2004, general meeting were unanimously approved.

The minutes of the May 3, 2004, chair's meeting were unanimously approved as amended.

The minutes of the June 7, 2004, general meeting were unanimously approved as amended.

CHAIR'S REPORT

- A news article from the *Los Angeles Business Journal* requires a response, as several misconceptions or doubtful statistics were included. Commission staff will research these questions with the department where necessary and draft a response for Commissioner review, prior to its submission. One particular fact cited by the article was communication between child welfare services and law enforcement, when in fact a recent motion by Supervisors Knabe and Antonovich specifically instructed the department to work more closely with the Sheriff and other law enforcement agencies, and traditionally social workers accompany Los Angeles Police Department personnel on appropriate calls.
- Because of vacations, the Commission's summer meeting schedule is often abbreviated. However, work is still required to ensure flow and coordination among work group reports prior to the Board-deputy briefing scheduled for August 19, and the Commission has yet to hear a final report from the permanency work group.

The Katie A. panel was expected to report on July 12 (July 5 is a holiday), but if the permanency work group is not ready to report by then, that meeting may be canceled. A quorum would be available on July 19 and July 26.

In August, nominations for Commission officers should be considered. Commissioners were asked to hold August 2, August 16, and August 30 for possible meeting dates, to be confirmed in July. The department's system improvement plan must be filed by September 2 to appear on the Board of Supervisors' September 14 agenda, and the department would appreciate a chance to present a final draft to the Commission on August 30.

In September, the first Monday is the Labor Day holiday; if a Commission meeting is scheduled on the following Tuesday (September 7), it may need to be held at departmental headquarters if a room in the Hall of Administration is not available. Officer elections could then be held on September 20.

- The Commission's annual retreat is being planned for either October 4 or October 18, from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., and Commissioners were asked to hold both these dates.
- Chair Williams attended a recent event at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion hosted by A Father's Heart, an organization dedicated to the importance of fathers in children's lives. John Hill—Supervisor Burke's chief deputy—and Curtis McClendon from Probation spoke, as did publicist Terry Watson. Chair Williams suggested inviting Mr. Hill or the judge who chairs the organization to present to the Commission at a future date.

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

- Since 30 percent of departmental investigations are driven by law enforcement, Dr. Sanders welcomed the Board motion about co-locating departmental staff into law enforcement offices. So far, staff have been invited into 18 precincts of the LAPD and 10 Sheriff's offices, and will be working to coordinate data by service planning area (SPA) and ZIP Code. A memorandum of understanding is being worked on with the Chief Administrative Office and County Counsel.
- Phase two of department redeployment deals with clerical support staff (phase one affected social workers), and the Labor Management Work Group has developed some initial recommendations. No formula for the appropriate ratio of clerical support staff to children's social workers had ever been drafted, and large disparities exist. In adoptions, for instance, the ratio may be as high as 8 clerical staff to every 10 CSWs, while regional offices can vary from 7:10 to less than 3:10.

The work group has developed appropriate formulas for regional offices, the hotline, court services, and adoptions, the average of which is about 4 clerical staff to 10 CSWs, or 40 percent. The work group is now considering priorities for the various clerical functions, how to make hiring into vacant positions consistent with the new formula, and the possibility of additional redeployment of staff.

- All information received about work being done with families currently comes from the children's social worker assigned to the case, and no data independent of that source is being collected directly from the families themselves. Dr. Sanders hopes that supervisors may soon begin to visit a percentage of the families assigned to the CSWs they supervise, both to support the CSW and to gather some independent impressions. The department is negotiating with the union, and redeployment of supervisors is being considered. The ratio is now approximately 1 Supervising CSW for every 7 CSWs; with hiring being contemplated, that ratio could shrink to 1:6.

WORK GROUP REPORT—Family Reunification

Commissioner Kleinberg introduced the family reunification work group's report, which has received the support of both Dr. Sanders and Judge Nash. The recommendations capture a change in philosophy where placement decision-making, case planning, parent/child visitation, court visits, and community-based intensive services are all part of a whole, and one piece does not stand without the others.

Historically, Dr. Sanders said, the department has identified child safety as its core. Children were removed from their families when they were unsafe, and returned when the environment became safe. With an assessment of risk as the starting point, the report calls for the use of team decision-making to reduce the risk to the child without removal from the home. The recommendations require:

- The whole system (not just DCFS) being involved in family reunification
- Procedures to affect both new children and the nearly 26,000 currently in the system
- Policy shifts as well as structural changes

Children belong with their families, and whatever length of time they spend in temporary settings increases the potential for the deterioration of family relationships. Under these family reunification recommendations, children are returned home when the imminent risk to their safety is gone, not when their families are 'perfect.'

Dr. Russ Carr reviewed the report's executive summary, which included the Child Welfare League's definition of family reunification, the stakeholders involved in the work group process, and the five building blocks necessary to a successful reunification program:

- Placement decision-making
- Parent/child visitation
- Intensive services
- Resource parent/birth parent collaboration
- Aftercare services

Areas of concern included:

- The length of time children remain in out-of-home care in Los Angeles County
- The current out-of-home care population of 25,945 children
- The disproportionate numbers of African-American and American Indian children in care
- The need for greater support for parents and children, and more and better parent/child visits
- The extraordinary role that substance abuse plays in the child welfare system (an estimated 70 to 90 percent of cases involve substance abuse in some way)

Reunification is the first option for permanency for the child. Social workers will use structured decision-making to determine risk, and remove the child only if there is immediate danger. Once the risk is eliminated or modified, the child will be returned home, and aftercare services will be available.

Dr. Jackie Acosta explained facilitated family-centered team decision-making as a strength-based tool for making high-quality decisions that are child-focused, linguistically and culturally appropriate, and tailored to the individual family. It is critical that support resources be developed and enhanced, and that partnerships with communities—as well as with the courts and attorneys—are maximized.

Dr. Carr reviewed the placement decision-making and case planning processes, with teams consisting of parents, the child (when age-appropriate), social workers, caregivers, public and private resources, and a parent advocate. He explained the parent advocate's role and also outlined reunification plans for the current out-of-home-care population.

Parent-child visitation, Commissioner Sorkin said, is the single highest predictor of the success of family reunification, and family-centered teams will support those visits to the utmost. Current policy requires only one visit per month between parent and child, but this report recommends daily visits for infants to at least weekly ones for older children

(along with regular phone contact), all of which needs to increase as reunification nears. Neutral monitors must be available, transportation issues should be addressed, and the use of family-friendly visiting sites will be explored. Commissioner Sorkin also reviewed training issues surrounding visitations, and noted that potential visitation sites could include various county parks and recreation areas functioning as part of Los Angeles County's Healthy Parks Initiative.

Commissioner Fahey reviewed the changes within the judicial process—from judges, departmental staff, parents' and children's attorneys, and County Counsel—necessary for family reunification to be successful. Communication between attorneys needs improving, for example, and a respectful atmosphere in court should be maintained. If cases are assigned by SPA, the courts should also be organized by SPA.

Judy Bayer from County Counsel agreed that a judge's decision is only as good as the facts presented, and that CSWs should be seen as confident and trusted allies in evaluating parental progress and identifying goals. She also discussed the roles of County Counsel, parents' attorneys, and children's attorneys, and stressed the nonadversarial nature of the ideal relationship among all parties.

Gwen Slattery, a parent advocate from Long Beach, detailed the fluid nature of resources within Los Angeles County, and explained the role of the Community Resource Specialist in tracking and providing linkages to these resources. Gary Puckett from the Department of Mental Health discussed the role of the Local Interagency Operations Networks (LIONs)—originally established for wraparound services—the SPA Councils, and other collaborative organizations in ensuring the availability of community-based intensive services for family reunification.

Commissioner Kleinberg acknowledged the efforts of all work group members and particularly thanked departmental staff Helen Berberian and Commission staff Dana Blackwell, Elizabeth Hinton, and Nansi Buenrostro.

Vice Chair Biondi asked how the department would work with Probation when a foster child was arrested and incarcerated while awaiting reunification, and Commissioner Kleinberg said that the work group had focused on the Department of Children and Family Services; procedures with other departments have yet to be worked out. Dr. Acosta added that the recommendations stress the model of individualized services for each family, and the door for collaboration between departments through the LION or other means is still left open.

Vice Chair Rudnick offered her congratulations to the work group, finding it heartening that its members were addressing issues in a much similar way to the prevention work group. On the subject of the funds needed to make this a reality, Commissioner Kleinberg noted that the IV-E waiver would restructure funding somewhat, and that successful family reunification would ultimately result in smaller caseloads. Dr. Sanders reported on a meeting last Friday with several private foundations where regional administrative staff asked for funds to hire parent advocates. Mr. Puckett cautioned that more money could lead to isolated decisions rather than the checks and balances provided by the team deci-

sion-making process; he maintained that the goal was not necessarily more services, but listening to families and making linkages to services already in existence. The regional authority must become accountable.

The family reunification work group's report was unanimously approved.

OLD BUSINESS

AB 636 Self-Assessment

Genie Chough presented the draft of Los Angeles County's self-assessment, the first of two documents due this year to the California Department of Social Services. It is part of a larger outcomes and accountability system that includes the collection of quantitative and qualitative data, plus a system improvement plan. Each finding was rated a major strength, an area needing improvement, a major area needing improvement, or a mixed result. The full report is available via e-mail.

- Safety and Prevention
 - Foster Care Rates
 - ✓ First entries into foster care (*strength*)
 - ✓ Rate of children in foster care (*strength*)
 - Rate of Abuse and Neglect
 - ✓ Recurrence of maltreatment (*area needing improvement*)
 - ✓ Rate of child abuse or neglect in foster care (*area needing improvement*)
 - ✓ Recurrence of abuse or neglect when children are not removed from their homes (*strength*)
 - ✓ Foster care reentry (*major strength*)
- Permanency and Stability
 - Permanency
 - ✓ Length of time to exit foster care to reunification (*major area needing improvement*)
 - ✓ Length of time to exit foster care to adoption (*major area needing improvement*)
 - Placement Stability
 - ✓ Multiple foster care placements (*strength*)
 - ✓ Least restrictive placement setting (*mixed*)
- Systemic Factors
 - Relevant Management Information Systems (*mixed*)
 - Services Array (*area needing improvement*)
 - Workload (*area needing improvement*)
 - Case Review System (*area needing improvement*)

Issues to be addressed in the system improvement plan include:

- Improving safety and increasing the focus on prevention
- Improving timelines to permanency, with the first permanency option being reunification

- Relying on detention more appropriately
- Recognizing Probation as an equal partner

As mentioned, the system improvement plan is due to the state on September 30, and the Commission will be briefed on August 30. Ms. Chough was asked to include on her timeline of relevant dates the Commission's August 19 briefing of the Board deputies on the efforts of the three work groups.

Vice Chair Biondi asked how the lack of communication between information systems or a CWS/CMS usage figure of less than 100 percent might affect the statistics in the report, and also cautioned against large conclusions being drawn without the tracking of reabuse, for instance, in kinship care. Ms. Chough pointed to the 'preliminary analysis' language included on page 7, and also stated that she believes the CWS/CMS usage factor to be somewhere around 90 percent. Commissioner Sorkin raised a question about controlling for Kin-GAP in the calculation of rates of children in foster care, and also noted that the 18 months of family reunification services mentioned on page 9 does not apply to very young children.

Ms. Chough thanked Commissioner Kleinberg and Commissioner Mattingly for their help in developing the self-assessment tool.

PUBLIC COMMENT

- Patricia Mulcahey recounted a number of her perceptions of the system, including the FBI's investigation of social workers using more than one Social Security number, lies and threatening behavior from her child's social worker, the lack of criminal background checks on everyone in a foster-care household, and why more women of color receiving welfare assistance have their children taken away.
- Gwen Bartholomew reported on the very successful fourth annual overnight camping event recently sponsored by the city's Recreation and Parks department. This year's event involved 22 families, with 30 adults and 106 children. She was able to video-tape some of the activities, and hopes to have a presentation soon.

Referring to Ms. Mulcahey's remarks, Ms. Bartholomew expressed her belief that parents do experience retaliation from social workers, and then related her concerns about the concept of supervising social workers making additional visits to families, on top of those made by assigned workers. Relative caregivers, she said, will sometimes avoid sharing problems with attorneys or social workers because of the fear that the children will be removed. Vice Chair Biondi emphasized that *all* family members should be included in a family decision-making team, and this could ease those concerns.

MEETING ADJOURNED